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# Counsel, Commitment, Comfort and Joy

Sidney Callahan

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SIDNEY CALLAHAN

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*Marianist Award Lecture/1990*

Counsel, Commitment,  
Comfort and Joy



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*The University of Dayton*

COUNSEL, COMMITMENT,  
COMFORT AND JOY

by SIDNEY CALLAHAN

Marianist Award Lecture  
1990

THE UNIVERSITY OF DAYTON

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SIDNEY CALLAHAN is a Professor of Psychology at Mercy College, Dobbs Ferry, N.Y. She received her B.A. from Bryn Mawr College, an M.A. in psychology from Sarah Lawrence, and her Ph.D. in social psychology from the City University of New York in 1980. She is licensed as a psychologist by the state of New York.

Dr. Callahan is the author or editor of nine books. They include *Conscience Reconsidered: Reason and Emotion in Moral Decisionmaking*, *With All Our Heart and Mind: The Spiritual Works of Mercy in a Psychological Age*, *Abortion: Understanding Differences*, and *Parenting: Principles and Politics of Parenthood*. She has published over 100 articles and essays in such publications as *The New Republic*, *Harper's*, *Psychology Today*, the *Hastings Center Report*, and *Commonweal*. She writes a regular column on medical ethics for *Hospital Progress*, and has appeared on the Today Show, the McNeil-Lehrer Hour, and Firing Line, among others.

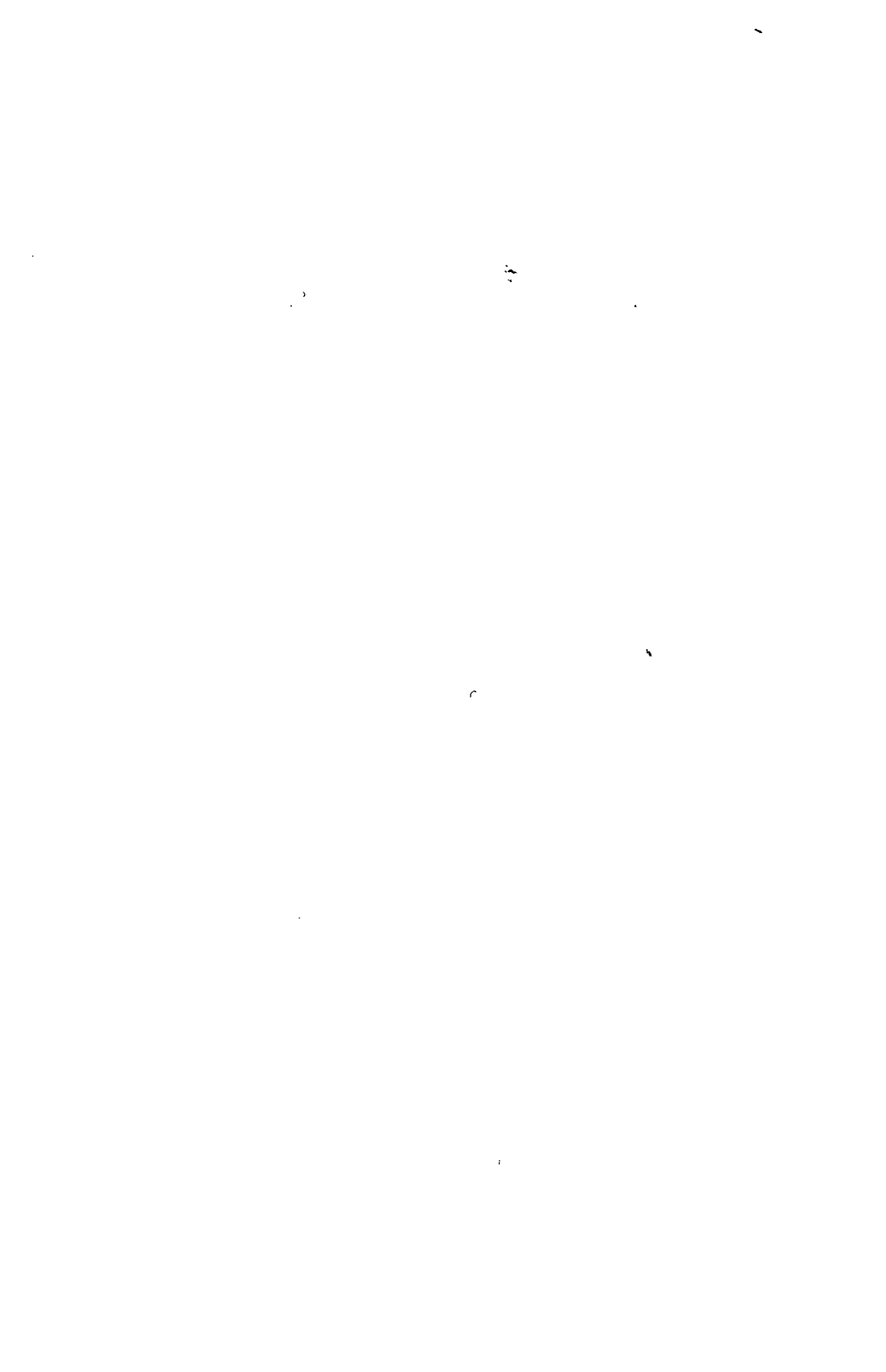
Sidney Callahan has lectured at over 200 American, Canadian and European universities, and has served as a consultant to the Ford Foundation, the National Science Foundation, the National Endowment for the Humanities, and the Catholic Health Association. She is President of Commonweal Associates, and a member of the Board of Directors of JustLife and the Association for Rights of Catholics in the Church.

Dr. Callahan is married to Daniel Callahan, co-founder and Director of The Hastings Center. They are the parents of six adult children.



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*The following lecture was given at the University of Dayton  
on the occasion of the presentation of the Marianist Award  
to Sidney Callahan, January 25, 1990.*





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## COUNSEL, COMMITMENT, COMFORT AND JOY

**M**y journey within Catholicism has been long and eventful, and always satisfying in the extreme. I had the good fortune to discover the pre-Vatican II Church in my late adolescence as I was struggling to grow up and find an intellectual ideal. Soon after my conversion I also began discovering love, marriage, childbirth, childrearing and domestic life with a great deal of manual labor and very little money. The Church validated these combined ideals of heart and mind, love and truth, family and scholarship—and helped me to pursue them.

Happily I was not inhibited by the need to overcome childish resentments of Catholic schooling (I have never had a day of formal Catholic education), or the oppressive hand of misused authority. All my oppressive authorities and orthodoxies involved the secular assurances of anti-religious dogmatism. In my circles there reigned a great deal of Wasp worldliness along with Ivy League certainties adhered to by all right thinking people of the right sort. Becoming a Catholic at Bryn Mawr College in 1954 was definitely not the fashionable thing to do; my lapsed Calvinist southern military family was appalled, my professors were saddened to see one more good mind going to waste by embracing love, marriage, babies and Roman superstition.

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I, for my part, was in ecstasy as a new Catholic, and could not believe my good fortune in having been blessed with such a variety of riches. This classic "honeymoon" phase of my religious conversion has made me more tolerant than some of the sentimental pietism in certain Catholic devotions, the extremes of sweetness and light, can be a true reflection of the experience of certain temperaments at certain times of life. In my case this fervor probably had little to do with holiness and a lot more to do with youth, good health and erotic energy. However, even now in middle age, while the honeymoon may be over, the marriage is fruitful and happy and the well is still producing living water for me. I welcome this chance to share my experiences of faith; I can express my gratitude for the gifts of Counsel, Commitment, Comfort and Joy.

## Counsel

I think of counsel as good counsel, or as a synonym for the wisdom of the Catholic heritage. The intellectual life and vocation became validated for me as I educated myself in Catholicism. I literally threw myself into mastering the Catholic religious heritage and benefitted from the works of scholarship which were available in English. As I studied I felt confirmed in taking as my vocation or calling, the intellectual life of a Christian humanist. Catholic Christianity affirmed many beliefs about truth and reality which made it seem worthwhile to continually seek an intellectual life.

The idea that Truth *is*, and exists beyond and independently of the individual mind's construction is a great impetus for those who would seek truth. The idea of truth is one of the great ideas of the western world; we owe much of our civilization and science to the conviction that there is a rational reality which exists independent of human minds but is still accessible to human thinking. Our reason is vindicated by the belief in a truth toward which human beings are drawn.

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Truth for Catholic believers, is also identified as the "I am" of God and Christ. When truth is identified with a divinity who is love, then truth and love are one. Truth and the intellectual quest need not be alien or austere; it can never be impersonal, sterile or value free. Once truth is seen as the personal, loving reality which divinely permeates all of creation, then the unity of the fabric of creation is assured. Everything to do with the intellectual effort to understand is worthwhile, "Whether you eat or drink, Whatsoever you do, Do it all for the love of Christ." Study and intellectual effort has intrinsic value for itself alone. This conviction that learning was good in itself and did not have to have a bottom line or practical use, kept me studying for long years at home before I could ever dream of going back to graduate school, or writing anything on my own.

I never felt that studying was an escape from life or beside the point. Once truth is seen as the underlying unity of creation, then study and pursuit of learning is getting at the center of things. All rivers will lead to the sea; the intellectual quest will uncover connections and structures which will be related. The more you know, the easier it is to learn, and the more you know there is to be learned.

This realization translated into time in the library means that a student has contemplative moments of great joy; there are flashes of intellectual ecstasy when you see that different bodies of knowledge are coming together, or you finally master a difficulty, and then say yes,—"aha"—I see it, I get it. The human mind comprehending, understanding and appreciating that one now knows if very much related to the core mysteries of reality and human consciousness. The student's work and effort to keep attention focused, to keep grappling with a challenge, falls away before the happiness of learning, knowing and understanding. The intellectual life has an intrinsic romance while it also requires detailed, disciplined work.

The intellectual life of study is a way to God through the wonders of the mind and the world. And God is infinite

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and truth is infinite. When I was a little girl I felt distress because I was sure that everything would already be known by the time I grew up, and there wouldn't be anything left for me to learn. I needn't have worried. God is a God of surprises with infinite variety and excitements to offer those who take the smallest step toward the Divine invitations. God is never, ever, boring.

The search for Truth, intrinsically wonderful, also turns out to be liberating and freeing. How many shackles and stereotypes have been left in the dust through inquiry, study and learning! To be educated is to be free. Good thinking and efforts to be reasonable and rational in all of one's personal thinking give one access to various critiques of current conditions. Mystifications and authoritarian oppressions of government, church, academia, medicine or economics—of the emperor's new clothes variety—come crashing down with sustained attention and thinking. On a more humble note, a person convinced of the effectiveness of rational thinking and effort can learn to do anything, including tax forms, motorcycle maintenance, statistics, computer programs, and how to follow inscrutable directions to put toys together on Christmas Eve.

The kind of disciplined thinking and effort which serves to see reality clearly can be turned inward upon the self, one's own personality and store of immaturity and craziness the flesh is heir to. Good thinking helps you grow up and become mature. New movements of cognitive therapy and reality therapy employ counseling techniques which point out and challenge erroneous irrational thinking patterns, which lead to personal disasters. "Why do you assume that you are entitled to a perfect life?" "Why do you think you must be perfect at all times?" "The dire effects or consequences you predict from event A are disproportionately exaggerated." And so on. Slowly the irrational can give way to reasoned wisdom in one's inner life. A lifelong dedication to truth and good counsel can forge the personal virtue of prudence, or "doing the right thing in the best possible way."

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The dedication to reason turns out to be incredibly practical because rational truth is at the core of ultimate reality. Believers in divine truth are confident that conflicts and problems between different disciplines and ways to truth will be resolved in the long run. I am a firm believer that our Catholic heritage is founded upon the double foundation of reason and revelation. I do not believe because it is absurd, but because it is rational to do so. Faith goes beyond the certainty of evidence, but not counter to rational thinking.

This assertion of the essential unity of truth is far easier to make now than in the nineteenth century when religion and science seemed bent upon a collision course. Today it is possible to see science and philosophy and morality and theology as similar rational pursuits, trying to approximate and penetrate the truth of reality ever more completely. We now have assimilated ideas of the historical evolution of ideas and the existence of progressive changes in successive paradigms and worldviews. While no formulation can be all encompassing and complete, progress can be made, and rationally tested against our experiences. Being a part of the progressive effort to intellectually understand reality is one of the most satisfying ways to live and work.

I have gradually seen what my own role as an intellectual should be. Happily, the vocation of thinking and scholarship is honored in Catholic life by our traditional respect for the great doctors of the Church, both male and female. One can also take heart by remembering the legion of unknown servants of the written word who copied and illuminated manuscripts, and thereby preserved traditions of learning in turbulent times. Today, we may get insight about our intellectual vocation rather slowly, but the film finally develops and the picture becomes clear. I find that as a psychologist I am drawn to study human self-consciousness, and our moral convictions and commitments. This is a domain of psychology where religion and moral philosophy overlap. How do we make moral decisions, and how does our personality affect our deliberations? At times I will address a more specific topic, such as reproductive decisions,

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but underlying this concern is the deeper interest in understanding how human beings are self-interpreting moral decisionmakers.

It takes courage in today's academia to undertake interdisciplinary work. We have all been professionally trained in narrow specialized competencies, and the academic reward structure reinforces specialization. One great liberating moment in my own interdisciplinary journey came when I could finally symbolically kill of my graduate school mentor in my academic superego. He had taught me that psychology was first of all a science, and operationalized empirical research counts as the most valuable enterprise. Now I know one must be daring and work on the most relevant problem, rather than go the narrow route which one's discipline or past training prescribes.

In my intellectual work and professional activities I try to put all my convictions and beliefs into practice. I attempt to teach undergraduates in a holistic interdisciplinary way, introducing students to the field of psychology and the importance of rational thinking and personal insight. I am less successful in trying to convey the idea of intellectual ecstasy and the romance of learning! Unfortunately, the discipline and detailed effort is less foreign to their idea of education as a boring, rite of passage. Naturally I struggle to try and improve my teaching semester after semester; oh, to be able to galvanize and excite as well as be a good coach.

I pray for energy and wisdom so that I will never burn out and be false to my intellectual vocation. I want to be of use and serve well. I pray before classes, and before talks that I may do as well as I can, and reach those who can make use of what I offer. I pray for guidance in choosing my writing projects. When something needs to be addressed, and I can do it, I try to overcome inertia and laziness. My prayer for wisdom becomes most fervent when I must take a controversial stand on some disputed point, such as abortion or surrogate mother-

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hood. I fear being wrong and leading others astray, and on the other hand, I fear succumbing to the pressures of the dominant secular majority who make it difficult to take an unpopular point of view. I think the intellectual life requires an interesting mix of stoutheartedness and steadfastness, which must be complemented by flexibility and openness to rational inquiry and change. Obtaining and keeping up this paradoxical stance takes energy and commitment.

## **Commitment**

No one comes to middle age without a new respect for the virtue of perseverance. How hard it is to keep on keeping on; to muster the energy to fight off inertia. In our affluent times it is easy to sink into our comforts and give up the struggle. The drive to make and take extra effort becomes more difficult as the hungry ego of youth becomes less insatiable.

There comes a point at which personal ambition no longer drives the work on, and one must work for internal, intrinsic reasons. This transition to inner directives, I find, entails finding a source of energy beyond the self. I must be able to receive grace in order to desire to desire. I most fear no longer caring about the truth or the good. Zest and enthusiasm tend to pale unless God gives inspiration to the effort. Novelty and the lust for excitement have long since been exhausted as a motive.

Here I think the experience of sacramental worship in community energizes and gives us commitment. Week after week we attend and worship and pray to receive spiritual food and be transformed. God hears us and answers our prayers for rescue and healing. Save us from atrophy, apathy and withering away. Keep us juicy. Refresh us, enspirit us, enliven us, and move us to take risks. We have to have a vision to keep growing and God does not fail to give us new dreams if we pay attention. Ask and you shall receive.

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Catholics have rightly understood and been prepared for the fact that life will be hard. In the Church the cross has never been forgotten or ignored as a reality of Christian life. Our struggles only take new forms in our middle-class American soap operas. Life is always harder than you can ever imagine, but the resources given to meet the setbacks also are more abundant than one might conceive beforehand.

Frequent worship and prayer make the home truths more and more apparent. Experience teaches us with its lived authority. We become convinced that we must always "do what you are doing." We begin to understand the sacrament of the present moment and the fact that we are called to live fully moment by moment, right now. This simplifying truth gives us a depth of commitment, for we cannot put off anything into the future or be nostalgic for the past.

I have always been attracted to the little way of St. Therese, filtered through the writing of my mentor in faith, the great Dorothy Day. Dorothy is so American, so full of commonsense and holiness. Little by little, minute by minute, we live our way into the future and slowly become transformed and accomplish whatever we have been given to do. Books are written a page at a time; marriages are created daily, and children grow and careers are made, one day at a time.

Christians have to be prepared to do whatever it is important to do. One of the ways one decides what is important is to find out what is uniquely your own particular task to do. Living in time we have to make constant decisions about the best deployment of our forces. Sometimes this means that we will be doing great things in the world, and sometimes our task will be the most personal and private errand. We should be ready for either one, and not shrink from the call of public life or the call of the sick room.

God seems to surprise us here too. The invitations keep coming through when we pay attention. We are not ever sure



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where we are going but we seem to be going somewhere. Last month we had reports in the press of a new continent of galaxies discovered in the distant sky, so huge that no one ever thought to look for it. Our galaxy along with others in the universe seems to be hurtling toward this mysterious mass at enormous speed. This amazing new discovery has been named "the great attractor." I find this an apt metaphor for God's effect upon us; we recognize that we too are caught up in the energy field of The Great Attractor. This realization gives us a sense of movement and excitement, but also produces comfort and joy.

## Comfort and Joy

My faith has been a great comfort to me, and along with all the other little old ladies, I am glad of it. I know the faith is supposed to afflict the comfortable as well; but we should not be afraid of admitting to great bouts of comfort and joy. Many have observed that in faith we move from a childlike faith, through rational critiques and intellectual understandings, and then come finally to "a second naivete." The final childlikeness is a "gift to be simple," as the Shakers would say.

In the more mystical experiential stage we feel that God cares for us as a mother, and is intimately a part of our lives. No matter is too small to bring up between friends. This assurance of God's care and presence within, produces an enormous sense of trust and comfort in times of trouble. My own sense of this maternal presence has accompanied an increase in Marian devotion, perhaps as a symbolic expression of this understanding of divine nurturing. Somehow when I say the great Marian prayers, I feel one with countless others over the centuries who have sought help—and received aid.

After all, even the most fortunate life will be filled with heart-break, disillusionment, illness, betrayals of various kinds. If one loves others, you give up forever the stoic *apatheia* which can

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give emotional control through detachment and isolating distance. You will suffer disappointments from others and with your own inadequacies. The inability to help those one loves is a particular torture.

God comforts us in our suffering in many ways. First we know that the suffering is shared and we are never alone. God knows, even if the world and others are giving false testimony or dismissing the troubling concern. In God's eyes we can feel vindicated, and know that ultimate reality can only give ultimate victory to the truth. The psalms are wonderful devotions when one is being beset by persecution or worldly troubles.

The other great comfort is to know that suffering will not be useless and meaningless in God's purposes and plans. Our suffering can be used somehow in the divine economy and will not be in vain. Finally, death will be overcome and all our losses and sadness will be restored in the Kingdom. This hope and faith comforts us, although it does not seem to lessen the pain of loss in the short run.

I began to meditate the other day on what it would mean to truly "take away the sins of the world." Human beings would have to be made whole enough and liberated enough to act without weakness or inner divisions. And then these free whole persons would have to want to be good and do God's will. God would have to heal us and restore us and then inflame us with a desire for God and the kingdom. But of course, this is our faith that somehow the kingdom will come and we will be transformed and live with God.

Comfort gives way to joy, so comfort and joy have always gone together. The Church tries in the liturgy to give depressed, glum Americans some glimmering of celebration and happiness. We have to learn to be happy, for we are basically afraid of joy most of the time and cling to the sureties of the land of gloom. It is hard to believe that the good news is real; that we are made to be joyful. Most holy people strike us as joyful

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and deeply happy, but it doesn't look easy to emulate.

I think we must learn to trust our joyful moments, those peak experiences of euphoria, which burst upon us from time to time. Those moments make us believe that the story is going to have a happy ending, and we will live to see it and dance at the marriage feast. Those moments of acute joy are precious and must be remembered and savored. They help us love more deeply and better still, trust our loving impulses. They inspire gratitude to God for consciousness and the graciousness of life.

Indeed, in looking back upon my journey in the faith my dominant response is gratitude. How deeply blessed we are to be alive, to know God, and be able to love and work. For me the Church has acted as it is meant to do, it has provided a sacramental encounter with Christ and the Holy Spirit. Our Catholic communion has given me counsel, commitment, comfort and joy. Grace has truly abounded.



## THE MARIANIST AWARD

Each year the University of Dayton presents the Marianist Award to a Roman Catholic distinguished for achievement in scholarship and the intellectual life.

Established in 1950, the award was originally presented to individuals who made outstanding contributions to Mariology. In 1967, the concept for the award was broadened to honor those people who had made outstanding contributions to humanity. The award, as currently given, was reactivated in 1986.

The Marianist Award is named for the founding religious order of the University of Dayton, the Society of Mary (Marianists). The award carries with it a stipend of \$5,000.

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1957	John McShain Eugene F. Kennedy, Jr.
1958	Winifred A. Feely
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1960	Eamon F. Carroll, O. Carm.
1961	Coley Taylor
1963	Rene Laurentin
1964	Philip C. Hoelle, S.M.
1965	Cyril O. Vollert, S.J.
1967	Eduardo Frei-Montalva
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1988	Timothy O'Meara
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